

NORTH MACEDONIA 2020 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution prohibits religious discrimination and provides for freedom of religion and religious expression. It grants equality before the law for all individuals regardless of religious belief. An amendment to the constitution cites five religious groups that automatically receive tax exemptions and other benefits: the Macedonian Orthodox Church, Islamic Religious Community in North Macedonia (IRC), Catholic Church, Evangelical Methodist Church, and the Jewish Community. Other religious groups must register to receive the same benefits. Registration applications by the Orthodox Archbishopric of Ohrid (OAO), affiliated with the Serbian Orthodox Church, and the Bektashi (Tetovo) Community, a Sufi group, remained pending with Skopje Basic Court II, following a May 2019 European Commission (EC) report calling on the government to comply with previous European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) rulings that the government should reconsider its earlier rejections of these groups' applications. The Bektashi (Tetovo) again reported harassment of its members by the government and the IRC. The IRC said the government continued to show favoritism toward the Macedonian Orthodox Church-Ohrid Archbishopric (MOC-OA), and smaller religious groups continued to report unequal government treatment compared with the five constitutionally named groups. In September, President Stevo Pendarovski and Prime Minister Zoran Zaev sent public letters asking Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I of Constantinople to bestow autocephaly on the MOC-OA, actions the OAO characterized as government meddling in religious affairs. On March 10, the government adopted the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's (IHRA) 2013 working definition of Holocaust denial and distortion. On February 7, the governing political party Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDSM), in response to anti-Semitic statements on social media, condemned "all forms of hate speech, anti-Semitism, or any other direct or indirect humiliation or discrimination of individuals and groups."

The Bektashi (Tetovo) Community continued to dispute the IRC's claims to full ownership of, and plans to renovate, the Harabati Baba Teqe, a complex the Bektashi (Tetovo) used as its headquarters. Media reported several incidents of theft, and the government reported one incident of vandalism against Orthodox cemeteries, compared with 12 acts of theft or vandalism of Orthodox sites in 2019. The government also reported one theft at a mosque. In January, the Jewish

Community and the Holocaust Fund posted on social media their joint condemnation of hate speech and anti-Semitic comments. In May, the Jewish Community reported to authorities multiple anti-Semitic and hate speech postings by a Facebook group called “Ninurta Macedonia.” The investigation was pending at year’s end.

The Ambassador and other U.S. embassy officials met with representatives from the government to discuss religious freedom issues, including improved interfaith cooperation and governmental respect for and equal treatment of faith groups. Embassy officials met with representatives of religious minority groups, including Bektashis (Tetovo), Jews, and Evangelical Methodists.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 2.1 million (midyear 2020 estimate). According to the most recent national census, in 2002, an estimated 65 percent of the population is Orthodox Christian and 33 percent Muslim. The vast majority of Muslims are Sunni. There are a small number of Sufi groups, including several Bektashi orders. Also according to the national census, other religious groups that together constitute less than 2 percent of the population includes Catholics, various Protestant denominations, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The Jewish Community estimates it has approximately 200 members.

The majority of Orthodox Christians live in the central and southeastern regions. Most Muslims live in the northern and western parts of the country. There is a correlation between ethnicity and religious affiliation: the majority of Orthodox Christians are ethnic Macedonian, and most Muslims are ethnic Albanian. Most Roma and virtually all ethnic Turks and ethnic Bosniaks are Muslim, and most ethnic Serbs and Vlachs are Orthodox Christian. There is also a correlation between religious and political affiliation, as political parties are largely divided along ethnic lines.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution prohibits religious discrimination and provides for equality of rights for all citizens regardless of religious belief. It grants freedom of religion and the right of individuals to express their faith freely and in public, individually,

or with others. The constitution also protects the religious identity of all communities. The constitution states restriction of freedoms and rights may not be applied to personal conviction, conscience, thought, or religious confession. An amendment to the constitution cites five religious groups that automatically receive tax exemptions and other benefits: the Macedonian Orthodox Church, IRC, Catholic Church, Evangelical Methodist Church, and Jewish Community. It stipulates these five groups, as well as other registered groups, are separate from the state, equal before the law, and free to establish schools, charities, and other social institutions. The law allows other religious groups to obtain the same legal rights and status as these five groups by applying for government recognition and registration through the courts. The constitution bars political parties or other associations from inciting religious hatred or intolerance.

The law defines hate crimes as criminal offenses against a person, legal entity, or related persons or property committed because of a real or assumed characteristic, including nationality, ethnic origin, and religion or belief, of the victim. Hate speech and hate crimes are punishable criminal acts and may result in harsher sentences for other crimes when hate crime elements are involved. Penalties range from one to 10 years in prison and a minimum of 10 years' imprisonment for hate crimes leading to death.

Religious organizations may apply to register as a "church," a "religious community," or a "religious group." These classifications are based on group size, internal organization, and internal hierarchy. The law treats these three categories equally, bestowing the same legal rights, benefits, and obligations on all of them. The government recognizes 38 religious organizations, including the five named in the constitution. The total consists of 18 churches, 10 religious communities, and 12 religious groups. Once registered, a church, religious community, or religious group is exempt from taxes and is eligible to apply for restitution of properties nationalized during the Communist era (provided the group or community existed during that era), government-funded projects, and construction permits for preservation of shrines and cultural sites. It may also establish schools. Unregistered groups may hold religious services or other meetings and proselytize, but they may not engage in certain activities such as establishing schools or receiving donations that are tax deductible for the donor, and they are not tax-exempt.

Skopje Basic Court II accepts registration applications and has 15 business days to determine whether a religious organization's application meets the legal registration criteria. The criteria are a physical administrative presence within the

country, an explanation of its beliefs and practices that distinguishes it from other religious organizations, and a unique name and official insignia. An applicant organization must also identify a supervisory body in charge of managing its finances and submit a breakdown of its financial assets and funding sources, as well as minutes from its founding meeting. The law allows multiple groups of a single faith to register. Leaders or legal representatives of registered religious groups must be citizens of the country.

The court sends approved applications to the Committee on Relations between Religious Communities and Groups (CRRCG), a government body responsible for fostering cooperation and communication between the government and registered religious groups, which adds the organization to its registry. The CRRCG has no oversight or ability to influence the registration process. If the court denies the application, the organization may appeal the decision to the State Appellate Court. If the appellate court denies the application, the organization may file a human rights petition with the Constitutional Court, the highest human rights court in the country. If the Constitutional Court denies the petition, the organization may appeal the case to the ECHR.

The law does not permit religious organizations to operate primary schools but allows them to operate schools at the secondary level and above. Religious high schools use their own curricula and are not subject to the Ministry of Education's certification. Students in religious high schools are not permitted to take the required national matriculation examination (baccalaureate) and therefore are unable to enroll in universities. The ministry requires sixth-grade students and above to take one of three elective courses, two of which have religious content: Introduction to Religions and Ethics in Religion. According to the ministry's description, these courses teach religion in an academic, nondevotional manner. Orthodox priests or imams, depending on demand from parents and students, usually teach the courses, with ministry consent, and the state pays their salaries. The Ministry of Education mandates that all teachers of these subjects receive training from accredited higher education institutions taught by professors of philosophy or sociology. If students do not wish to take a course on religion, they may take the third option, Classical Culture in European Civilization.

All foreigners who seek to enter the country to carry out religious work or perform religious rites must obtain a work visa before arrival, a process that normally takes approximately four months. The CRRCG maintains a register of all foreign religious workers, and various government offices may approve or deny them the right to conduct religious work within the country. The CRRCG issues the

approvals for temporary residence permits and/or working visa requests for missionaries and religious workers on behalf of registered churches, religious communities, and religious groups; the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy verifies they do not violate the country's labor laws; and the Ministry of Interior looks at security aspects. Unregistered groups may seek work permits and visas according to the normal procedure. Work visas are valid for six months, with the option to renew for an additional six months. Subsequent visa renewals are valid for one year. There is no limit to the number of visa renewals for which a religious worker may apply. Clergy and religious workers from unregistered groups are eligible for visas.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Government Practices

At year's end, Skopje Basic Court II had not taken action to comply with the May 2019 EC full country report, which called on the government to implement earlier ECHR rulings to respect the rights of the OAO and the Bektashi (Tetovo) Community. In 2017, the ECHR ruled the government violated the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (the Convention) by rejecting the OAO's earlier application for religious-group status. In 2018, the ECHR made a similar ruling regarding the Bektashi (Tetovo). The *2020 European Commission Progress Report*, published in October, stated North Macedonia needed to implement the 2018 ECHR ruling.

Although the government compensated the OAO 9,500 euros (\$11,700) for damages and court fees as required by the 2017 ECHR ruling in 2019, OAO authorities continued to state the government refused to register the group, interfered in the work of the judiciary in cases involving the OAO, and exerted pressure on the OAO to reapply for registration under a new name. The OAO cited a letter from Skopje Basic Court II in February requesting the OAO change its name because the court could not differentiate it from the MOC-OA. At year's end, the OAO's 2009 registration application, without a name change, remained pending with Skopje Basic Court II.

The government paid the Bektashi (Tetovo) Community compensation in June 2019 for damages and court fees as required by the 2018 ECHR ruling, but it took no further action in 2020. The group's 2010 registration application remained pending with Skopje Basic Court II at year's end.

According to government officials, the ECHR rulings did not change the country's legal requirement that an applicant's name be different from an already registered religious group; hence both the Bektashi (Tetovo) and the OAO needed to change or modify their names to register in court. According to these officials, the Bektashi (Tetovo) remained unregistered, mainly due to its unresolved property disputes with the IRC, the IRC's interference with the courts, and because two other Bektashi communities were already registered, both in Kichevo. The officials said in the case of the OAO, registration had not been possible because it preferred to operate under the jurisdiction of the Serbian Orthodox Church and would not accept the removal of "AO" from its name, which the OAO considered historically important.

Skopje Basic Court II offered the OAO the opportunity to reapply with a new name in February, and the Bektashi (Tetovo) in March. Both applicants declined to consider a new name and asked the court to implement the respective ECHR rulings. There were no further developments in either case at year's end.

In March, Skopje Basic Court II rejected the Bektashi (Tetovo) Community's request to reexamine its registration application, based on the April 2018 ECHR ruling. The court's October 2018 verdict stated it gave the Bektashi (Tetovo) a 30-day deadline to submit a new registration application under a name different from that of the two already registered Bektashi groups (in Kichevo). The Bektashi (Tetovo) refused and asked the court to instead implement the ECHR verdict. The court also gave the Bektashi (Tetovo) until December 15, 2019, to submit the necessary documentation and inform the court of its negotiations with the government regarding implementation of the ECHR's ruling, which the Bektashi (Tetovo) declined to do.

The OAO and the Bektashi (Tetovo) Community said that, as unregistered communities, they continued to face discrimination and intimidation, such as lack of tax-exempt status, the inability to organize their own schools, and disparaging comments about them on social media. The OAO continued to accuse the government of bias against it and of failure to respect domestic and international law.

In June, the World Leader of the Bektashi Community, Baba Dede Edmond Brahimai, called on the government to immediately act to mend the infringement on the Bektashi's (Tetovo) right to religious belief and property, urging then interim Prime Minister Oliver Spasovski's government to implement (or comply with) the April 2018 ECHR ruling requiring the registration of the Bektashi

(Tetovo) Community.

In January, the OAO called the Supreme Court's December 2019 decision rejecting its request for an extraordinary review of the February 2017 Criminal Court ruling against defrocked Bishop Jovan Vraniskovski and two others for money laundering "inadmissible and unfounded." The Supreme Court determined that Vraniskovski laundered and spent 8.6 million denars (\$172,000) and that the property purchased with that money remained in the MOC-OA's possession because Vraniskovski was an MOC-OA member at the time of purchase. In February 2017, the Criminal Court in Skopje sentenced Vraniskovski to 13 months in prison and two others to two-year suspended sentences. The appellate court upheld the criminal court's ruling. The OAO stated the ruling was the result of government bias.

In March, the OAO said media had subjected its representatives to censorship for saying the government's advocacy for MOC-OA autocephaly, which it began requesting in 2018, represented political interference in religious matters in violation of the country's secular character. Additionally, OAO officials said their family members were unduly discriminated against in bureaucratic procedures for issuing certificates and travel documents.

During the year, Skopje Basic Court II received and approved three new registration applications. In June, it registered the "Bashkesia e Ehli Sunetit dhe Xhematit," headquartered in Kumanovo and run by Sadulla Bajrami, a preacher many Sunnis said they considered controversial because they said he supported ISIS, which the CRRCG added to its registry. In December, the same court registered two groups: the Qadiriyya Badawi Group "Zakaria," with headquarters in Kumanovo, and the "Dar al-Hadith" Islamic Salafi Community, headquartered in Skopje.

For the ninth year, the Bektashi (Tetovo) reported to police acts of harassment by individuals occupying the Harabati Baba Teqe compound in Tetovo as part of a property dispute with the IRC. Police were still investigating at year's end. The Bektashi (Tetovo) stated these individuals stole equipment and kitchen utensils from the Bektashi (Tetovo) headquarters in Tetovo on the eve of the Sultan Nevruz spring holiday on March 22.

On May 19, Mayor of Gostivar Arben Taravari provided the IRC Mufti of Gostivar, Shaqir Fetahu, with property legalization acts for 28 Islamic religious buildings within the municipality, including for two Bektashi (Tetovo) *teqes*

(shrines), both in the village of Vrutok. The Bektashi (Tetovo) Community said handing the property acts for *teqes* to the IRC, instead of the Bektashi (Tetovo) Community, was “unjust.”

The IRC stated the government treated the IRC as “its enemy,” showed favoritism toward the MOC-OA, and used a “selective justice” approach. The IRC said the government had restored less than 30 percent of property the state seized before gaining independence in 1991. Among the disputed properties was the Husamedin Pasha Mosque in Shtip, nationalized in 1955.

The IRC stated the government continued to deny a construction permit for a mosque in the ethnically and religiously mixed village of Lazhec, and that it continued to deny a permit to reconstruct a mosque in Strumica and the central mosque in Prilep, on the grounds they were cultural monuments under government, not IRC, jurisdiction.

In July, the IRC stated the government had favored the MOC-OA by granting it unique privileges, such as providing it with public properties free of charge and funding for the construction of new Orthodox churches.

The MOC-OA stated the municipality of Struga had still not ruled on an application, pending since 2013, for construction of an Orthodox church in the village of Oktisi.

Smaller religious groups continued to state the government treated them unequally and favored the religious groups listed in the constitution over others. They said Prime Minister Zaev, President Pendarovski, and other government officials often met only with the five constitutionally recognized groups.

On September 24, Prime Minister Zaev met with Archbishop Stefan and an MOC-OA delegation to discuss continued efforts to secure the MOC-OA’s autocephaly, a request Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I began reviewing in 2018. Zaev expressed support and readiness to encourage government institutions to complete denationalizing the Church’s property and protect its cultural heritage. The delegation thanked Zaev for his letter to the Ecumenical Patriarch, sent in September, and for advocating for the MOC-OA’s autocephaly. In January, former interim Prime Minister Spasovski and then former Prime Minister Zaev met with the Ecumenical Patriarch and in September, both President Pendarovski and Prime Minister Zaev sent public letters asking him to bestow autocephaly on the MOC-OA. The OAO characterized this as government meddling in religious

affairs.

On September 21, parliament amended the Law on High School Education; however, issues related to certifying religious high schools, final exams, and the ability of students graduating from these schools to enroll in the country's universities remained unaddressed through year's end.

Some religious groups, parents, and Ministry of Education officials stated Orthodox priests and imams hired to teach the required nondenominational introductory courses on religion and ethics often emphasized the practice of their own religions instead of presenting a neutral overview of different faiths.

On March 10, the government adopted the IHRA 2013 working definition of Holocaust denial and distortion. The government tasked the Ministry of Education and Science, Bureau for the Development of Education, and Institute of Spiritual and Cultural Heritage of the Albanians (ITSH) to translate, within three months, the December 2019 IHRA *Recommendations for Teaching and Learning about the Holocaust* into the Macedonian, Albanian, Turkish, and Serbian languages to disseminate to schools across the country.

In June, the ITSH launched a four-day online training course on Holocaust education for 45 elementary and high school teachers from around the country, in cooperation with the Ministry of Education and Science, Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and Yad Vashem World Holocaust Remembrance Center in Jerusalem. Minister of Education and Science Arber Ademi emphasized the importance of partnership and Holocaust education in the Balkans and noted this event was part of the strategy to incorporate Holocaust education within the formal state education system and to secure tools to implement it.

On January 6, political party leaders condemned anti-Semitic comments made on social media by Vidana Boskova Micevska, affiliated with the governing SDSM political party, against the then interim Minister of Labor and Social Policy and Jewish Community member Rashela Mizrahi. Micevska wrote on Facebook, "I don't mind that Rashela joined a fascist party. I'm sure the Nazis also had Jews who fought for better welfare rights for the Jews." On January 7, then former Prime Minister Zaev responded on Facebook, stating the heightened use of insults on social media was "unacceptable in any democratic society." He called on SDSM members and supporters to "be responsible and refrain from hate speech, racism, and xenophobia, as well as any speech that may be perceived as anti-Semitic."

Media widely publicized journalist Branko Trichkovski's February 6 anti-Semitic tweet about Mizrahi, in which Trichkovski said Mizrahi "eats hummus made of dead Jews." On February 7, the Ministry of Interior reported it notified the Basic Public Prosecutor's Office in Skopje of the incident. In a February 7 Facebook post, SDSM condemned "all forms of hate speech, anti-Semitism, or any other direct or indirect humiliation or discrimination of individuals and groups." The government made no charges regarding the incident.

On March 18, the government declared a 30-day state of emergency, and on March 21, it implemented a nationwide curfew to contain the spread of COVID-19. Authorities took a series of measures to limit mass gatherings, which impacted religious groups. Some religious groups objected to the government restrictions. On April 18, a group of approximately 100 Orthodox followers ignored the restrictions and gathered in the Bigorski Monastery to celebrate Easter.

On May 7, the IRC announced its plans to reopen mosques for prayer beginning on May 12 due to the decreased number of COVID-19 cases. On May 10, the IRC issued preventive measures for worshippers, including disinfecting mosques, limiting sermons to 10 minutes, and banning gatherings before or after prayers. On May 9, the government appealed to the IRC to reconsider its decision to reopen mosques, and a government press release urged religious communities to refrain from organizing any gatherings. On May 7, hundreds of Orthodox worshippers joined a procession in Struga to celebrate St. George's Day, in contravention of measures prohibiting gatherings.

The government called on MOC-OA Archbishop Stefan and IRC Reis Rexhepi to express concerns regarding the May 7 religious procession in Struga and the IRC's announcement to reopen mosques, and urged them to call for worshippers to act responsibly as well as to condemn any behavior contravening government measures. The IRC, however, reopened mosques on May 12. Reportedly, the government avoided confronting the IRC regarding noncompliance with COVID-19 restrictions because police had not taken any action to prevent the Struga procession and the government did not want to be perceived as favoring one religious group over another. Sources stated that the government was reluctant to take any action after police did not prevent the litany in Struga, and that this was probably to avoid being perceived as biased toward the MOC-OA.

On June 4, the Public Prosecutor's Office told the press it had opened a case based on public information against Povardarie Eparchy Bishop Agatangel for publicly

calling on Orthodox believers from the cities and municipalities of Veles, Kavadarci, Negotino, and Gevgelija to visit churches and cemeteries for Pentecost, despite government COVID-19 restrictions on mass gatherings.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

OAO officials said they and their family members were often targets of insults in media and victims of physical attacks by individuals considered close to MOC-OA. According to media, in October, cemetery personnel in Skopje-Gjorche Petrov denied a family's request that an OAO priest perform funeral services and instead sent an MOC-OA priest. When a journalist asked why the request was denied, the MOC-OA priest verbally abused him.

The Bektashi (Tetovo) Community continued to dispute the IRC's claims to full ownership of, and plans to renovate with Turkish assistance, the Harabati Baba Teqe complex that the Bektashi (Tetovo) used as its headquarters, including in a letter written to then interim Prime Minister Spasovski in May. Bektashi (Tetovo) representatives continued to express concern the renovation of the complex would displace them from the compound entirely. The Bektashi (Tetovo) could not assert a claim of ownership to the compound because the group remained unregistered. At year's end, the renovation project remained pending until completion of feasibility studies.

Media reported several incidents of theft from, and the government reported one incident of vandalism against, Orthodox cemeteries, compared with 12 acts of theft or vandalism of Orthodox sites in 2019. In January, police reported that unknown individuals disassembled and stole copper gutters from a mosque in downtown Gostivar City, in the western part of the country. In April, the CRRCG condemned the desecration of the Orthodox cemetery in the Kamnik section of Skopje and urged authorities to find and prosecute the perpetrators. An investigation of the incident continued through year's end.

In February, the MOC-OA sent a letter to the leader of the Integra political party protesting the appearance of an MOC-OA church in the background of a political ad. In July, the Jewish Community issued a press release requesting political parties not use Jewish cemeteries and insignia in political campaign ads.

In December, the Helsinki Committee in the country registered 38 incidents of hate speech with a religious component during the year, compared with eight in 2019.

In January, the Jewish Community and the Holocaust Fund posted on social media their joint condemnation of hate speech and anti-Semitic comments. They called on citizens, political parties, and institutions to reject such rhetoric and to instead embrace a culture of respect by participating in Holocaust remembrance and education. In May, the Jewish Community reported to authorities multiple anti-Semitic and hate speech postings by a Facebook group called Ninurta Macedonia. A May 12 post from this group read, “Jews’ souls are the demons’ homes” and asked that persons avoid them because they were “a universal plague,” and further calling them “dirty, cruel, and inhumane.” The investigation was pending at year’s end.

The Holocaust Fund, an NGO, continued to work with the Ministry of Education and Science on a project to train educators to teach secondary school students about the Holocaust and Jewish history. The Holocaust Fund held four webinars for that purpose during the year.

In March, the Holocaust Memorial Center opened a multimillion-dollar permanent exhibition commemorating the country’s Jewish population and the 7,148 Jews sent to the Treblinka death camp during World War II; however, the exhibit remained closed to the public for much of the year due to COVID-19 restrictions. As in previous years, the center conducted Holocaust education programs in partnership with the Ministry of Education and Science, until the introduction of COVID-19 restrictions.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The Ambassador and other embassy officials held meetings with government representatives, including Minister of Interior Oliver Spasovski, Minister of Justice Renata Deskoska, and Deputy Prime Minister for European Union Affairs Bujar Osmani, to discuss issues of religious freedom and tolerance, such as improved interfaith cooperation and governmental respect for and equal treatment of faith groups.

The Ambassador discussed interfaith tolerance and cooperation with religious leaders and the importance of open dialogue with faith groups during formal and informal meetings. In February, the Ambassador engaged with a group of religious and civil society leaders from the MOC-OA, IRC, Jewish Community, Bektashi (Tetovo), Evangelical Methodists, and civil society leaders who had participated in a U.S. exchange program to discuss religious freedom, respect for

diversity, the protection of cultural heritage, and the importance of respect for religious diversity.

Embassy officials met with IRC leader Fetahu and MOC-OA Archbishop Stefan to discuss religious freedom issues, including perceived government favoritism toward certain religious groups.

The embassy posted 12 messages on social media regarding religious freedom, reaching more than 62,000 followers. Topics included the annual U.S. Prayer Breakfast, the President's proclamation on Religious Freedom Day, and a message about the important roles religious communities play in helping their congregations and their most vulnerable members confront the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic.